

Friends in high places

Britain's Labour government reveals its compassion for Pinochet

Chris Marsden
24 October 1998

Former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet has many friends in high places. At home, President Eduardo Frei is urging the British government to release him on both diplomatic and humanitarian grounds, “given his serious health condition”. Five days before a visit to Britain, President Menem of Argentina—a country with a long history of conflict with Chile—declared his “total” support for Pinochet’s release. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher publicly called for the freeing of “a good friend to this country during the Falklands War”.

Angelica Cristi, leader of a delegation of right-wing Chilean MPs in Britain, painted a dubious picture of Pinochet as a man at death’s door, who “does not understand what is going on. He keeps wondering when he can go home. He does not know about the extradition yet. I am not so sure that he has been told he is under arrest.” (Perhaps Pinochet misunderstood what was happening when the police entered his room in the private London Clinic last Friday and told him he was being detained.)

Now it is the turn of the head of the Church of England to bestow the milk of human kindness on Pinochet. Appealing for a “Christian approach”, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, told BBC Radio: “I do hope, and I am confident, that our government will pay attention to the personal aspects of this and the caring, and to be compassionate in this situation. There are factors that led them to take the action they have done, and, of course, I am sure they will pay attention to Baroness Thatcher, as, of course, we all do.”

No sooner had the Archbishop issued his epistle of forgiveness than Home Secretary Jack Straw indicated

that he too was inclined to forgive and forget. In a written parliamentary answer, Straw said that, even in his “quasi-judicial role”, he could take into account “compassionate circumstances” and possibly overturn Spain’s extradition request.

All of which leaves a decidedly nasty taste in the mouth. Straw is, after all, notorious for his “zero-tolerance” policy toward crime. Nor has he shown “humanitarian” qualms when it comes to the innocent victims of British-backed sanctions against Iraq, supposedly designed to punish another dictator, or the thousands of old people in Britain who—without Pinochet’s access to Harley Street—die as a result of Labour’s health cuts.

The daughter of the late Chilean President Salvador Allende, Isabel Hilton, spoke for millions when she described Thatcher’s call for the release of Pinochet “shameful”. She published a comment in the *Guardian* newspaper that stated: “Let us remember, too, that the substance of the case involves mass murder, torture and disappearance, and that at least two British citizens were direct victims. Are you [Thatcher] saying to Dr. Cassidy and to the relatives of the late William Beausire that their rights are of no account when the interests of the state, as you perceive them, are involved?”

“You say that General Pinochet’s legal status is an internal Chilean matter. Is the status of the suspects in the Lockerbie bombing an internal Libyan matter? ... What are you saying, Lady Thatcher? The law does not matter if broken by a friend? Or an arms dealer? That crimes against humanity don’t matter if it’s our son of a bitch who commits them?”

The Blair government, however, is looking for an

excuse to let Pinochet go and none could be better than that proffered by the devout Dr. Carey. This is, after all, Pinochet's second visit to Britain while Labour has been in power. The first, in October last year, took place without incident. This one would have done likewise had the extradition request from Spain not landed on Jack Straw's doorstep.

The Blair government fears that putting Pinochet on trial would bring the skeletons out of the closet regarding US and British involvement in the bloody 1973 coup. Moreover, each passing day brings new evidence to light of the continuing relations between the British government and Pinochet in his de-facto role as head of the Chilean armed forces.

Yesterday, Pinochet's supporters released a September 3 letter from Malcolm Lassan, a Royal Ordnance executive, inviting the General to visit the company's factory in Worcestershire. Royal Ordnance, the arms manufacturer owned by British Aerospace, has close links with the government. According to the *Times* newspaper, Pinochet was invited to study the progress of an artillery rocket being built for the Chilean army and inspect other projects designed "to confront the defence needs of the next century".



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact